

## Furman Magazine

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Volume 47  
Issue 2 Summer 2004

Article 4

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6-1-2004

# Engaging the Future

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### Recommended Citation

Kazee, Tom (2004) "Engaging the Future," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol47/iss2/4>

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# Engaging the Future

BY TOM KAZEE

FURMAN'S NEW STRATEGIC PLAN FOCUSES ON INVIGORATING THE ACADEMIC CLIMATE ON CAMPUS.

*"Furman intends through its curricular and co-curricular programming to cultivate habits of the mind and heart that have at their core intellectual energy and curiosity and to nurture and create a community of students, faculty, and staff committed to the life of the mind."*

With that sentence as premise, the architects of Furman's new strategic plan, approved unanimously in May by the faculty and the board of trustees, introduce an ambitious set of goals for the university's near-term future. The plan, titled "Engaging the Future: A New Strategic Plan for Furman," aims to refocus the energy of the university on a fundamental academic mission: to educate undergraduates in an environment animated by intellectual excitement, curiosity and commitment to lifelong learning.

Even as the faculty, staff and students who worked on the plan recognized the excellence and quality of our existing programs, their conclusion was that we can enrich the ways in which we engage students intellectually. We can, in short, build on our manifest strengths to make intellectual vigor a pervasive and exciting characteristic of a Furman education — both inside and outside the classroom.

## BUILDING THE PLAN

To achieve its goal, Furman must first take stock of where it has been and where it thinks it is headed. There is no better place to begin such an assessment than by looking at the existing strategic plan — which is, for any university, its most recent effort to define itself and its goals.

"Furman 2001" was developed in the mid-1990s and has shaped, in important ways, the university's direction during most of the last decade. It established "engaged learning" as the centerpiece of the Furman experience and made the university a leader in what is now an often-emulated emphasis on extending learning beyond the classroom.

"Furman 2001" also emphasized more attention to student-faculty collaborative research, internships, study abroad, and other forms of academic enrichment that would make our students' educational experience one of distinctive





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quality. We created the Christian A. Johnson Center for Engaged Learning to introduce and coordinate more engaged approaches to learning for faculty and students. Other key goals included building the endowment, increasing applications for admission, raising alumni support for the annual fund, enhancing faculty compensation, and increasing the diversity of the student body.

Yet strategic plans, even those that succeed in building new programs and advancing an institution's long-term goals, must be re-evaluated periodically. To what extent does a changing academic and resource landscape require a university to rethink its direction or refocus its energies? Although we may be convinced that a liberal education, in the abstract, is unparalleled as a way to prepare students for the challenges of life after Furman, how closely does a Furman education approximate the liberal ideal? Only through the intense self-scrutiny of a strategic planning process can these questions be addressed and new strategic directions realized.

To this end, President David Shi, drawing on the model used to develop "Furman 2001," formed in the fall of 2003 eight working groups and charged them with identifying goals in their areas and suggesting strategies to achieve them. The working groups, consisting of faculty, staff, students and alumni, focused on a range of topics, from academics to student development and community relations. They raised questions, gathered data, evaluated various proposals, and eventually prepared points of strategic emphasis. They shared their reports with the Strategic Planning Steering Committee (composed primarily of representatives of the

working groups) and with the entire faculty several times during the year.

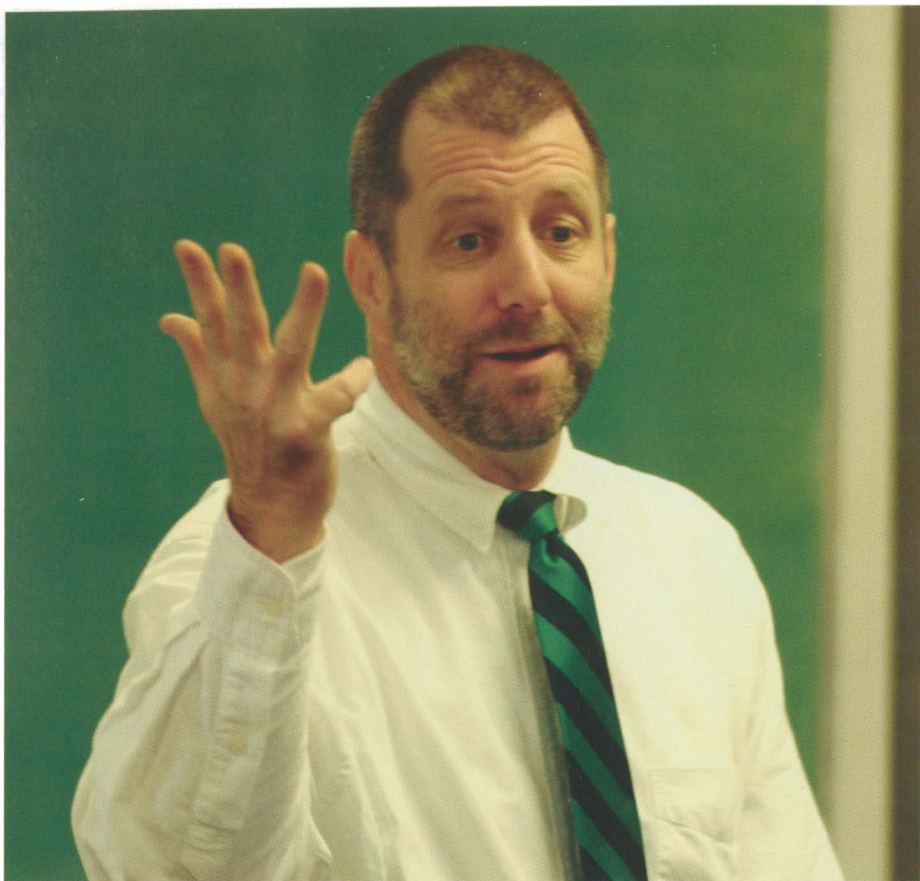
It soon became clear that consensus around a major goal had formed: to "enhance the academic program so as to cultivate greater intellectual excitement." Although "Engaging the Future," as the plan came to be called, includes an array of strategic initiatives in many areas of campus life (see accompanying story), its central focus is the creation and sustenance of an intellectual community of unusual vigor and commitment.

## ASSESSING THE CURRICULUM

The Academic Program Working Group, which I co-chaired with James C. Edwards, chair of the Department of Philosophy, was responsible for assessing the university's academic environment and recommending strategic goals to enrich it. The group met weekly and quickly became a hothouse for stimulating discussions about Furman's academic soul — a rich mix of opinions, ruminations, arguments and, in the end, proposals for how to enrich the intellectual experience at Furman.

The group consisted of faculty from all of the major academic divisions, plus a rookie academic dean who could share experiences from several other outstanding liberal arts colleges that have wrestled with similar questions. We read widely and diversely, trying both to understand better what Furman is doing and what others outside the university have said about liberal education, curricular design and the nature of the undergraduate student experience.

As our conversations progressed, it became abundantly



clear that our critical first step should be a careful assessment of Furman's curriculum. Although several groups had examined aspects of the curriculum in the past decade, a comprehensive, exhaustive review had not been conducted for many years.

Often percolating to the surface of our conversations about curriculum was concern about Furman's existing General Education Requirements. The "GERs," as they are known, require all students to complete a set of core courses in fine arts, humanities, mathematics and natural sciences, and social sciences. GERs, as the Furman catalogue states, enable students to "acquire the breadth in educational experience which characterizes liberal education, develop intellectual discipline, discover their interests and build a foundation for specialization."

This is a daunting set of objectives. To achieve them, about half of the courses taken by a typical student to satisfy graduation requirements are GER courses. Unfortunately, after meeting GER requirements and requirements in a major field of study, students' opportunities for intellectual exploration, a key characteristic of liberal education, are limited. The working group soon became convinced that in reviewing the curriculum, we needed to re-evaluate the GERs.

As the group mulled the challenges of curricular reassessment, it bumped regularly into an issue that is inextricably linked to any discussion of Furman's academic environment: our unusual academic calendar. The three-term system — with two 12-week "wing" terms and a winter term of approximately seven weeks — produces

both advantages and disadvantages for students and faculty, and is a frequent topic of conversation among both groups. Although the working group reached no consensus about the advisability of keeping or revamping the current calendar, it agreed emphatically that an evaluation of curriculum should include explicit consideration of the costs and benefits of our calendar and of calendars used by other outstanding liberal arts colleges. We might consider, for example, a traditional two-semester system, or some variation on the "4-1-4" theme.

The Academic Program Working Group thus recommended that a fundamental element of the new strategic plan should be the creation of a Curricular Review Committee (CRC). This committee would be charged to conduct a comprehensive review of curriculum, including assessment of the General Education Requirements and the academic calendar. The CRC, led by Aristide Tessitore, professor of political science, has already begun its work.

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The intense engagement of the academic group in addressing questions related to curriculum and the academic community dovetailed with the work of several other groups focusing on similar concerns. As we shared information with the groups examining engaged learning and information technology, for example, a common concern emerged about the trajectories students follow from matriculation to graduation.

We know that at the beginning of their Furman experience, students arrive on campus excited about joining





an intellectual community, but we worry that this excitement is muted by a focus on “checking the boxes” of their academic requirements. In other words, to satisfy the GERS many first-year students gravitate to introductory courses that are often lecture-based and include larger numbers of students than in a typical Furman class. Too often lacking for first-year students is the stimulation of a small seminar class that focuses on a topic of particular interest to the student and professor and links in-class experiences to external issues and themes. The goal of first-year seminars would thus be to cultivate “habits of the mind and heart” promised by a liberal arts education.

The working groups wrestled as well with the challenge of forging an integrative perspective in our students, especially during the senior year. What has four years of engagement with material from a rich array of academic disciplines produced — a fragmented, compartmentalized understanding of the world, or a nuanced, integrated worldview that appreciates diversity and the interrelationships of ideas? Perhaps a senior-year capstone experience would help students develop this kind of integrative understanding. Through the application of new technologies, such as the development of so-called “e-portfolios,” students would be encouraged to weave together the seemingly disparate elements of their undergraduate experience — while acquiring important technological skills.

Moreover, these conversations, rich with possibility, produced recommendations about “information fluency” and how we might better ensure that students develop it. We are awash in information, virtually inundated with data,



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claims, counterclaims and material from a plethora of media sources — all accessible in ways not imagined a generation ago. Our students need to develop a better understanding of how to acquire important and relevant information, and to be able to discern which information is valuable and accurate and which obfuscates or misleads.

“Engaging the Future” thus charges the university to consider creating a first-year seminar, require senior capstone courses, develop an e-portfolio pilot program, and provide ways to enrich information fluency skills through the curriculum.

## FACULTY AND LEARNING

As the strategic planning groups raised curricular and related academic issues, our conversation turned to faculty development. How can we support the faculty so that they might better create intellectually stimulating environments in and out of the classroom?

The Johnson Center for Engaged Learning and the Center for Collaborative Learning and Communication were, in part, designed to help meet this need. We have not, however, created an institutional structure explicitly to work with faculty interested in honing teaching skills, exploring new pedagogies, addressing questions related to instructional technologies and, in general, identifying ways of enabling faculty to better fulfill their potential as teachers and scholars in an environment committed to engaged learning. We have allocated substantial resources to these tasks, but our strategic planning conversations focused on better aligning those resources to meet specific faculty needs.





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An important strategic initiative in our new plan, therefore, is to design a Center for Teaching and Learning. Such a center can do much to animate faculty intellectual activity and collaboration, which is fundamental to the intellectual community envisaged in “Engaging the Future.”

Impetus for the creation of a Center for Teaching and Learning came in part from faculty and staff anxious to see information technology more effectively support our faculty and students. Information technology has become an integral part of the college experience; it is instrumental to what we do in our classrooms, residence halls, offices and libraries. Even faculty who consider themselves pedagogical traditionalists have come to expect a high level of technological support for their collaborative activities, and a large number of their colleagues now routinely use projection systems, Internet connections and wireless capabilities — innovations that would have been considered novel or unusual just a decade ago.

No longer can we assume that support for the use of instructional technology, not to mention innovation, can come from an institutional structure built primarily to support administrative computing or to offer academic support only for a subset of faculty users. We must be thoughtful and intentional about building the infrastructure and finding and supporting a staff that can help Furman to more fully exploit technology as a teaching and learning resource.

Our new strategic plan thus lays out explicit information technology goals designed to create and sustain learning environments appropriate to a leading national liberal arts

university. “Engaging the Future” commits us, for example, to “implement software and hardware to enhance collaboration among students, faculty, and the larger community.” Collaboration is a critical need for faculty and students in an academic world that has become increasingly learner-centric (as opposed to teacher-centric). We need, moreover, to better enable the exploration of existing and emerging technologies, and to ensure that all teaching and learning spaces are appropriately equipped. In this vein, Furman is already committed to improving and expanding our campus wired and wireless networks and to increasing the number of academic computing specialists with high level, discipline-specific skills.

Of critical importance for our students and faculty is the strategic commitment, carried over from “Furman 2001,” to renovate Plyler Hall of Science and add substantial new space for the sciences. A Science Building Steering Committee, consisting of faculty, staff and students and supported by an advisory board of alumni, has been hard at work on this initiative. These groups are collaborating with a consulting firm to design new and renovated space that will transform science education at Furman in the coming decades. As the planning process moves ahead, we have begun the challenging task of raising the approximately \$50 million necessary to turn these plans into reality.

## A TWO-TIERED APPROACH

Strategic plans typically are designed to chart an institution’s direction for five or perhaps even 10 years. To try to cover a long period of time is to risk the plan’s irrelevance in the

## Strategic initiatives

*In addition to its commitment to enriching the intellectual climate of the university, "Engaging the Future: A Strategic Plan for Furman 2004-06" calls for comprehensive examination of many other areas of campus life.*

### **I. Holistic development of students, faculty and staff.**

Furman recognizes the importance of enhancing personal and professional growth, providing academic and ethical guidance, and promoting diversity in thought and culture for all members of the campus community. Planned initiatives include:

- Convert senior year into a cumulative learning experience.
- Improve sophomore academic advising and orientation.
- Increase endowed support for scholarships.
- Provide student-athletes with an experience commensurate with Furman's expectations and resources for athletics.
- Provide faculty salaries that are competitive with regional peers.
- Develop a benchmarking program with colleges and businesses

to enable staff to improve job skills, processes and programs.

### **II. Increased awareness of environmental sustainability.**

The university promotes sustainability through educational projects, campus operations and construction practices, and public awareness programs. Planned initiatives include:

- Conduct a comprehensive campus environmental audit.
- Appoint a sustainability coordinator.
- Work with local agencies to protect and enhance the environment surrounding Furman.

### **III. Service to the larger community.**

Liberal arts colleges are often accused of functioning apart from the "real world." Through public lectures, performances, athletic events and

other opportunities, Furman will expand its role as an engaged member of the greater community. Planned initiatives include:

- Carry the arts to the community through programs in downtown Greenville.
- Collaborate with community groups on lectures and other projects.
- Provide a home for the Furman University Learning in Retirement (FULIR) program.
- Provide the means for student-athletes to better integrate themselves into the Upstate community.
- Create new opportunities for alumni worldwide to become involved with Furman.

*The complete text of "Engaging the Future: A Strategic Plan for Furman 2004-06" can be found on-line at [www.furman.edu/planning/strategicplan](http://www.furman.edu/planning/strategicplan).*

later years; to plan for a shorter period is to risk spending more time planning than doing.

Recognizing the wide-ranging implications of the comprehensive curricular review, "Engaging the Future" is two-tiered. It will begin with a two-year phase, with primary emphasis on the evaluation of curriculum and calendar, followed by a five-year phase. While the broad emphases of the five-year phase are outlined in the plan, specific initiatives and strategies may well depend on the outcome of the curricular and calendar review.

To be sure, this does not mean that the university will be strategically passive as the curricular assessment unfolds. Many crucial projects will proceed immediately. Designing and implementing a Center for Teaching and Learning, enhancing technological support for the academic program, creating new science facilities — these initiatives and more can move forward without waiting for the results of the curricular evaluation.

I've focused here only on those aspects of "Engaging the Future" that are closely tied to the overall goal of nurturing an academic community of distinctive intellectual vigor. This approach, of course, does not do justice to the plan as a whole, which features an ambitious set of strategic goals. The complete plan emphasizes, for example, the development of students, faculty and staff as whole persons, and recognizes as well the critical importance of building a diverse community. Moreover, it reaffirms the importance of compensation levels adequate to attract and retain outstanding staff and faculty.

In addition, of great importance is the plan's emphasis

on an awareness of environmental sustainability. We aim to encourage environmental citizenship as one of the critical habits of mind and heart upon which the plan is premised.

Our conversations have, as a whole, revealed a community diverse in interests and goals. As at any great academic institution, our members don't always agree about the directions in which we ought to be headed. The planning process, however, has generated an unusual degree of consensus and support for the goal of enriching Furman's intellectual climate.

I was moved, in particular, when a professor with more than 30 years of distinctive service to the university rose during a winter-term faculty meeting to comment on the strategic planning process. He noted that he was a member of the Academic Program Working Group, and said that this conversation — especially our focus on the prospects for new intellectual vitality — was among the most stimulating and exciting moments of his university career.

This excitement, we trust, will be contagious as we prepare to "Engage the Future" at Furman. ●

*The author became vice president for academic affairs and dean at Furman in July 2003. He previously was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of the South in Seawane, Tenn. He holds a doctorate in political science from Ohio State University.*